

January 17, 2019

State Senator John Whitmire  
P.O. Box 12068  
Austin, Texas 78711

Dear Senator Whitmire:

I am writing in response to your letter expressing concern over the Harris County Jail. The Harris County Sheriff's Office team that I lead takes very seriously our duty of caring for the lives of the 9,000 inmates entrusted to our care.

Like you, I am deeply troubled any time an inmate in our jail loses their life by suicide. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, suicide is the leading cause of death in local American jails, accounting for 35 percent of all deaths in custody. By contrast, about 15 percent of the inmate deaths in the Harris County Jail since 2009 have been the result of suicide. The national local jail suicide rate is 50 per 100,000 inmates. In Harris County, the suicide rate is 16 per 100,000 inmates.

In the five years before I took office, the Harris County Jail averaged two inmate suicides per year. Two inmates tragically took their own lives in each of my first two years serving as sheriff.

Although suicide is far less prevalent in the Harris County Jail than in jails elsewhere, I will not be satisfied with our progress until we have zero inmate suicides. To address this issue, our team strives to support our inmates in many ways, including:

- We have increased our emphasis on re-entry programs that teach the professional and social skills that can help inmates return to society better equipped to contribute to their communities and families.
- We operate one of the largest inmate education programs in the nation in partnership with Houston Community College.
- Our study of past inmate suicides has revealed that many are accomplished by inmates hanging themselves in private cells. In response, we have replaced bed sheets with heavy blankets in those cells, a decision endorsed by the Jail Commission.
- We implemented a first-of-its-kind tele-psychiatry program that equips deputies with iPads connected to psychiatrists who can quickly assess those experiencing a mental health crisis and advise deputies on the best course of action, often avoiding a trip to the jail all together.
- We offered a chance at recovery to opiate-abusing inmates by giving them promising addiction-breaking medication and linking them to post-release services.
- We have increased training for detention officers and supervisors to further emphasize best suicide-prevention practices.

I look forward to working with the Texas Commission on Jail Standards, our Legislative delegation, and with our county leadership to find more ways to ensure the safety of the inmates in our care.

As you know, our jail has hosted two inspections by the Texas Commission on Jail Standards during my time as sheriff. We passed the 2017 inspection with no issues. In 2018, inspectors found the jail in compliance in 21 of 23 areas of review. We fell short in the areas of sanitation and food service in some areas of our jail complex.

As a result, we are currently on the list of 20 Texas jails that are out of compliance for various issues. I personally met with the inspectors and I am directly involved in working with our team to address these issues.

Our team takes these areas of non-compliance seriously. Corrective actions were taken immediately, and we are studying additional ways to improve operations and management. In addition, our county leaders are engaged in discussions with our existing vendor, Aramark, to improve food and maintenance services that they are contractually tasked with managing.

The other issues that have caused our jail to be found temporarily out of compliance were proactively self-reported by our staff, and did not result from an inspection. We appreciate and respect the Jail Commission's important role in helping our staff quickly identify and address areas of concern. In each of these self-reported cases, we have taken immediate corrective action that resulted in the restoration of our compliance status.

As you are aware, Hurricane Harvey had a very significant impact on the day-to-day operation of the entire Harris County criminal justice system, which led to jail overcrowding. When I took office, I inherited a jail that was outsourcing hundreds of inmates. We managed to end that outsourcing after just a few months on the job. But when Harvey shut down Harris County's courtrooms, the jail experienced a backlog of inmates awaiting trial, and we were forced to resume outsourcing. Although our current outsourced population now stands at 232, I am happy to report that all of these inmates are in Texas facilities and none are in Louisiana. I am also encouraged that the work I have done in partnership with Commissioners Court, District Attorney Kim Ogg, and our newly elected judges has resulted in a more thoughtful bail system that should reduce the number of people booked into our jail for low-level misdemeanor offenses.

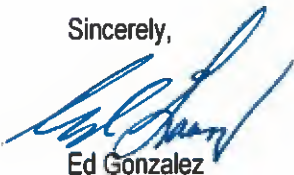
I take time regularly to meet personally with many of these inmates, because they are our neighbors and they are important to the people who love them. Since taking office as sheriff two years ago, I have made it a point to speak to every class of new detention officers on their academy graduation day. Each time, I encourage them to remember that the people in our jail are struggling with their lives, and they are distraught. I caution our detention officers against holding inmates in low regard, and I remind them to never check their humanity at the door. I tell them to treat all people, especially those who are vulnerable, with dignity and respect. As sheriff, I model this form of humble, servant leadership every day.

Our team stands ready to work with you to address the challenges that come with operating the largest county jail in Texas. Among those challenges is the fact that we currently house about 600 inmates on behalf of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. These include convicts who are awaiting transfer to a state prison to begin serving their time, along with more than 300 parole violators. Although I understand TDCJ has its own challenges, I would appreciate any assistance you could offer with these prisoners who no longer belong in the Harris County Jail. Addressing this issue alone would be enough for us to end the need for inmate outsourcing.

Furthermore, on the state level, the lack of space at Texas mental hospitals is causing our eligible, pre-trial inmates to wait an average of 146 days for a bed to open in a more appropriate state mental institution. I fully support all of your efforts in the Legislature to increase the state's investment toward addressing our mental health crisis.

I am grateful for your support, and for your heartfelt advocacy for the constituents we serve. I take personal ownership of our entire operation, and our team will continue striving to meet the high standards we have for ourselves.

Sincerely,



Ed Gonzalez  
Harris County Sheriff